

Mar. 17 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1999

been made. By putting the Senate on record as continuing to support negotiated reductions in strategic nuclear arms, the bill reaffirms that our missile defense policy must take into account our arms control objectives.

We are committed to meeting the growing danger that outlaw nations will develop and deploy long-range missiles that could deliver weapons of mass destruction against us and our allies. Next year we will, for the first time, determine whether to deploy a limited national missile defense against these threats, when we review the results of flight tests and other developmental efforts, consider cost estimates, and evaluate the threat. In making our determination, we will

also review progress in achieving our arms control objectives, including negotiating any amendments to the ABM Treaty that may be required to accommodate a possible NMD deployment.

This week the Russian Duma took an encouraging step toward obtaining final approval of START II. We want to move ahead on the START III framework, which I negotiated with President Yeltsin in 1997, to cut Russian and U.S. arsenals 80 percent from cold war levels, while maintaining the ABM Treaty as a cornerstone of strategic stability. The changes made in the NMD bill during Senate debate ensure these crucial objectives will be fully taken into account as we pursue our NMD program.

Statement on Proposed Patients' Rights Legislation

March 17, 1999

Today the Congress is beginning its work on patients' rights legislation. This issue is critical to assuring Americans high quality health care in the 21st century, so I am pleased that we are moving forward.

Unfortunately, the proposal by the Chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee falls far short of the legislation the American people deserve. Because it applies patients' rights only to those in self-insured plans, this proposal leaves 120 million Americans in insured and individual plans without the guarantee of critical protections. Millions of Americans should not be held hostage to the hope that their State might pass legislation providing these protections. In fact, while States have the authority to pass patient protections for these plans, not one has enacted all of these protections. That is why we need strong Federal legislation to ensure that all health plans provide patients these important rights.

Even for those it does cover, the Chairman's proposal leaves out many of the most fundamental protections. For example, it does not have an adequate enforcement mechanism to ensure that patients are compensated when they are injured or die as a result of a health plan's decisions; it does not assure patients access to specialists, such as oncologists or heart specialists; and it leaves our continuity of care protections. That is why every major patient, doctor, and nurse advocacy organization has concluded that this proposal is simply inadequate.

Today represents the first test of whether this new Congress is serious about providing Americans with a strong, enforceable Patients' Bill of Rights to assure high quality health care. I urge the Committee to do everything it can to pass this test and give Americans the health care protections they need.

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to George J. Mitchell

March 17, 1999

The President. Well, thank you very much. I am very grateful for your warm reception.

I take it you had a good time inside. *[Laughter]* You not only put me out of the White House,